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Red Growth Rate

THE ECONOMIC growth rate of the Soviet Union seems just as elusive, just as difficult to predict or pin down, as that of the United States. Three years ago, when he was head of the Central Intelligence Agency, Allen Dulles forecast that the Soviet's growth rate would bring that country "dangerously close" to the economic level of this one by 1970. Later, apparently under the impression that a CIA director surely ought to know what he's talking about, Premier Khrushchev also selected 1970 as the year for overtaking America. But last February Under Secretary of the Treasury Henry Fowler, projecting on the basis of growth trends of the 1950's, said Soviet output would not equal this country's until 1980.

Now comes another economist, Willard Thorp, testifying before a joint congressional economic committee. He notes that optimistic Soviet predictions have now advanced to 1980 (presumably on the assumption that Mr. Fowler knew what HE was talking about last February) and even that is too soon. As a matter of fact, according to Mr. Thorp, the Soviet growth rate is slowing down considerably. In the past four years it actually has lagged behind the economic growth of Japan, Italy and West Germany and is barely keeping up with that of France.

Inexplicably Mr. Thorp does not pick a year in the distant future when he thinks the catch-up will occur. Perhaps, compassionately, he doesn't want the Soviets to assume HE knows what he's talking about and be disappointed again.